“A lush, slow, reverb-laden breakbeat paired with a whispery sampled vocal track — it glides through you like a mist, seeping into your pores and tangling in your hair”

BRAINDANCE

Despite its small size the UK harbours a diverse array of landscapes. From rolling green fields festooned with stately homes, to rugged spray-strewn cliffs and ashy industrial hillsides wrinkled by terraces. The physical geography of Britain, as with all places, has shaped its people. However, as the frenetic excesses of the 1980s drew to a close, a group of artists emerged, intent on shaping some landscapes of their own.

House had torn through Chicago, spawning techno and electro as it went. This trio bled across the Atlantic, finding a new home in England's green and pleasant land, and as they journeyed their sounds warped into the semi-organic squelches of acid. By the time it arrived in Britain, electronic dance music was approaching adolescence and, as with many adolescents, there came cries for rebellion. From Cornwall to Scotland, musicians were producing what was initially labelled 'techno', 'acid' or 'ambient'. But their sound was hard to define, spanning many genres of the nascent electronic music scene. They eventually ended up grouped together under one especially unappealing moniker, revealed later in this guide...

The focus was on personality and individuality: creating music for its own sake and for the pleasure of making, rather than writing with palatability or commercial success in mind. These artists wanted to break away from the regularity and newfound traditions of the electronic music they heard around them. Potentiating the DIY attitude of punk rock with the creative depth of the genres borne from it, what they made was tied together more by a philosophy of experimentation and eclecticism than a strict adherence to musical code. No institution embodied this more than Warp records. Started in Sheffield in 1989, Warp became a bastion of creative development in the British music industry with a story inextricably linked to the artists below.

Unfortunately Warp and its associates' bid for individuality landed them with the name I alluded to earlier: IDM, Intelligent Dance Music (cue eyerolls!). Pretentious and off-putting, the name has been shunned by many of the artists forced to plod along under its umbrella. Hopefully my own writing doesn't serve to bolster its pretences and I can convey to you what it is that I enjoy so much about this music: its creativity, beauty and diverse range of styles and influences.

***Xtal* – Aphex Twin** 1992

Of all the artists associated with IDM Aphex Twin is probably the most recognisable. Originally from Ireland but brought up in Redruth, Cornwall, Aphex (Richard D. James) has been creating a diverse and expansive sonic wilderness since the early nineties. This album forms its bedrock. A lush, slow, reverb-laden breakbeat paired with a whispery sampled vocal track, 'Xtal' glides through you like a mist, seeping into your pores and tangling in your hair. The track's lilting melodies are deeply nostalgic — rendered more impressive when you realise it was written when Mr Twin was only 15 years old — what did Lil Richard have to be so nostalgic about!?

To me and many others this track is an Aphex classic. It is the first example of his melodic prowess and atmospheric sensibilities culminating in a song that transports you somewhere softer, more ethereal and quietly euphoric. 'Xtal' (which I conjecture is pronounced crystal, as in Xmas) is on the only album of his not released by Warp, rather by R&S Records — a Belgian techno and rave label. The album represents a body of his work from 1985-1992, when he was aged 14-21. As he developed, his work broke out from these *Selected Ambient Works* into far stranger, more twistedly intricate aural ecosystems. Despite this, the foundations laid here undoubtedly percolate throughout.

***De-Orbit* – Speedy J** 1992

I must confess I do not know so much about the backstory of the next two artists on this list, especially Speedy J. I do, however, just really like this song. Rhythmically similar to 'Xtal' but less lush and ethereal, 'De-Orbit' sits more clearly on the techno side of the ambient-techno spectrum that most were using to classify this music in the early 1990s. I love the electric snake that wriggles across the highs, dancing with the strange vocal cries to form the melodic backbone. There is a touch of Bicep here that can only be hailed as forward thinking, considering the contemporary duo were but a twinkle in their parents' eyes when this was released.

'De-Orbit' is also included for historical significance. It was released on the seminal Warp compilation *Artificial Intelligence*, an album widely credited with giving birth to and defining the early IDM scene as a whole. This compilation would spawn a series of releases on Warp between 1992-1994 showcasing their new brand of electronic music for home listening.

Hall of Mirrors – B12 1993

B12's album *Electro-Soma*, to which 'Hall of Mirrors' belongs, was the fourth release in the Artificial Intelligence series. B12 were a duo, and are one of only two artists on this list from London. Another euphoric techno-esque track, I see this as the cleaner-shaven cousin of 'De-Orbit'. But what it lacks in hissing analogue ambience it more than makes up for in gorgeous interlacing melodies and that wicked, short delay, bouncy-ball-in-a-tin-can kind of sound that picks the track back up just as it threatens to drop off into the somnambulance of its pads.

Flutter – Autechre 1994

Until now we have been safe. Ambience has kept the previous tracks soft, downtempo and warm. 'Flutter', however, is composed of a rapid, twisting flurry of drum sounds fired down the centre of the stereo channel, ricocheting outwards as delayed contortions of their former selves. They are smeared across the wide parts of the sound while incessant, but delicate, synths colour the cold drum hits. This marks a departure in our list from melodic soundscapes of the early nineties into the intense experimentation of the scene's maturation. Drums no longer serve solely as vessels for time keeping and instead become the main narrative in a lot of the tracks.

Alongside Aphex Twin, Squarepusher and Boards of Canada, Autechre form the pantheon of IDM gods. They sit atop a hill on the edge of Sheffield and guide young musicians to future successes.

'Flutter' is special within Autchre's discography as being the only track (to my knowledge) with any explicit political intent. It was released in response to the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act which set out to ban unlicensed raves by allowing the police to shut down any event playing music that had a "successive repetition of beats". Accordingly, Autechre (Rob Brown and Sean Booth) wrote this track deliberately void of repeating drum patterns. The EP it was released on, *Anti EP*, also came with a stickered warning about the offending Justice Act saying:

> *"'Flutter' has been programmed in such a way that no bars contain identical beats and can therefore be played at both forty five and thirty three revolutions under the proposed new law. However we advise DJs to have a lawyer and musicologist present at all times to confirm the non repetitive nature of the music in the event of police harassment."*

Beep Street **– Squarepusher** 1997

Squarepusher has a uniquely jazz-flavoured sound compared to the rest of the IDM pantheon — he even plays the bass for many of his tracks on a real life instrument! 'Beep Street' is composed of rapid, complexly sequenced breakbeat patterns set amidst layered melodic lines, deemed by many to fit within an IDM subgenre of sorts called drill 'n' bass. The rapid succession of drum hits, in particular snares, is the drill and the bass is, well… the bass. In my humble opinion Squarepusher remains the king of intricate, choppy breakbeat sequencing to this day. His style has undoubtedly inspired many of the musicians in the current jungle revival: artists like Tim Reaper, dgoHn and Dwarde. In comparison to Aphex Twin and Autechre he lacks the techno origins, shunning the four on the floor in favour of breakbeat backbones and jazzy colourings. *Listen to more Squarepusher!*

Music Is Math **– Boards of Canada** 2002

Of the four in the 'pantheon' I seem to have created in my head, I am least familiar with Boards of Canada (affectionately referred to as BoC). I only really know this album (*Geogaddi*) and their hits. They are, however, a very necessary inclusion on this list. Their music has a heavy nostalgia to it, playing out in a haze of VHS tape and cassette noise, tickled by pitch-bending distortion. BoC have many more popular and canonically "them" songs than 'Music is Math' (I hate the fact it is not Maths) but I have chosen to include it. I think this is because it instantly transports me back to a time and space in my life more so than their other tracks. It has a sinister and creeping atmosphere that fills me with dread, but it ultimately appeals to me for the same reason the other songs on this list do: its immersive, nearly smothering, embrace. The drums squelch through its hazy bog, each kick like a laboured step onwards, while wavering synths sit as a crowd of sneering onlookers, snickering at their efforts. Just as with Aphex, Autechre and Squarepusher, BoC have successfully created a unique musical landscape, with each song a piece of the tapestry. For some lighter, less oppressive BoC tracks I would recommend 'Peacock Tail', 'Everything You Do is a Balloon' and 'Roygbiv'!

Rae **– Autechre** 1998

The next two songs in the list are so meaningful to me it is hard to put into words. 'Rae' is a simply gorgeous song. It starts abruptly and without

warning, with rolling, heavy kicks and sizzling snares, topped by cold, floating synth lines shining like ice on a clear morning. After countless listens through almost all possible forms, I still feel I do not understand 'Rae'. Contrast is key in this song, the drums act as a counterpoint to the melody, and the start and end are spectral opposites. For all its initial abruptness, roughly halfway through the song it slows and the drums retreat, leaving a granular melodic palette which it slowly settles away into. The song has a chaotic melancholy, it is contrasting and yet singular in its sound. Above all I do not want to analyse it too closely — some things are better left as they are.

'Rae' is on *LP5*, an album on the precipice of great change for Autechre, and indeed the whole IDM scene. Akin to Bob Dylan going electric, Autechre began to leave their warm, analogue techno roots behind after this record, heading for an initially cold, digital biome that is significantly harder listening. Although trying at first, the payoff is great: some of the most transcendental music I have ever listened to.

Girl/Boy Song **– Aphex Twin**
1996

We did it, we have reached the end! To round off the list is 'Girl/Boy Song', a frenetic semi-orchestral, semi-stab-in-the-eye-with-a-glowing-skewer number which is still — somehow — delicate. It is an ode, in my eyes, to that restless, tightly-wound joy that one sometimes feels: writhing with excitement. It is purely hopeful and defiant. I cannot count how many times I have screamed along to the melody that emerges from the barrage of machine-gun-drums. The pizzicato strings, flanked by the steady bass and lifted by the music box twinkle. It is childhood joy, resilience to everything and the promise of something good!

As with 'Rae', I do not want to analyse this track too deeply, I am just happy to share it with you.

This guide covers most of the '90s in IDM, but the genre has so much more to offer and has only grown and expanded in the decades since. I hope you enjoy these songs as much as I have and let's call it a better name! Some call it braindance — let's stick with that!!!